The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained & Wielded Global Dominance

Roundtable *Review*

Reviewed Works:

Michael H. Hunt. *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained & Wielded Global Dominance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, April 2007. 416 pp., 8 illus., 1 table, notes, bibl., index. $34.95 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-8078-3090-1.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Andrew Bacevich, Alfred E. Eckes, Stephen G. Rabe, Thomas Zeiler

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Contents

Introduction by Thomas R. Maddux, California State University, Northridge 2
Review by Andrew Bacevich, Boston University 8
Review by Alfred E. Eckes, Ohio University 11
Review by Stephen G. Rabe, University of Texas at Dallas 14
Review by Thomas W. Zeiler, University of Colorado at Boulder 20
Author's Response by Michael H. Hunt, University of North Carolina 25

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Introduction by Thomas R. Maddux, California State University, Northridge

A year ago H-Diplo featured a roundtable on Charles Maier's *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (2006) and included among the commentators Michael Hunt.[1] Maier devoted considerable attention in the first part of his study to analytical comparison of empires across time and space and, then, in the second part, focused on "America's Turn," with emphasis on the period from the Cold War into the 21st century. In his review of Maier's study, Hunt noted that he had a forthcoming book on "American Ascendancy" that would explore the different phases of empire that the United States moved through from continental expansionism through settler colonialism to formal overseas empire in the late 19th century, followed by informal empire from the 20th to the 21st century. Hunt noted that each "imperial thrust" generated a critical reaction which created difficulties in justifying and managing the latest empire.

In *The American Ascendancy*, Maier explores the rise of the United States to dominance, the key elements that shaped the U.S. rise before 1900 in a global context, and with the addition of the modern national state from the 1880s to the 1940s, prepared the U.S. for hegemony. Hunt does not offer a chronological, textbook oriented approach. In the first four chapters he moves from the foundations in the 19th century to a peak of geopolitical dominance by 1968 with the imperial president leading an expanded bureaucracy and commanding deference from the American public and Congress. In the second half of the book, Hunt shifts to examine the most unique features of the U.S. hegemony, the successful effort to build an international regime based on U.S. values and interests in political and economic arenas including consumerism with the U.S. as a model of modernity. Hunt also explores the U.S. relationship with the third world after 1941 where he notes the challenges posed to U.S. dominance and the difficulties faced by U.S. leaders in reconciling their cultural and racial views, their economic interests, and the Cold War competition with their commitment to self-determination. The U.S. is depicted as the "Disoriented Giant" after 1968, faced with challenges at home and abroad, and with U.S. leaders from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan finding themselves limited by external constraints. The end of the Cold War brings a chapter on the "Neoliberal Triumph" with emphasis on advancing the free market economy through globalization and the demise of the post-Cold War euphoria and "end of history" optimism with the arrival of militants, both Islamic challengers and what Hunt calls the "Neoliberals," led by President George Bush and his advisers.

For a thorough assessment of the relationship of Hunt's *Ascendancy* with other authors examining the U.S. role in the world, see Stephen G. Rabe's review in this roundtable.

An interpretive study of this nature raises a number of issues and questions that merit further discussion including

[1] H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors,* by Thomas Maddux, Andrew J. Bacevich, Michael Hunt, and Anna K. Nelson. Volume VII, No. 6 (2006), published 19 October 2006. http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#7.6 .

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1.) Has Hunt adequately addressed the most significant elements that shaped the U.S. rise to ascendancy by 1914 including the role of contingency which the author is careful to note as well as global forces which provided "constraints and opportunities" for the U.S. rise? The global forces that Hunt emphasizes include the emergence of the U.S. in the North Atlantic world as a European settler society; the necessary adjustment of Americans to the rise of the modern national state; and American involvement in the creation of an economic and social modernity with new technologies. As far as internal developments in the 19th century related to global forces, Hunt develops the importance of English migration and territorial control; conquest of Native Americans and expulsion of European powers; the development of a premier capitalist economy and a sense of nationalism.

2.) Hunt recognizes the important role played by U.S. leaders in the rise to ascendancy as well as the challenges faced before and after 1968: "The agents of the state deserve the pride of place that they are traditionally accorded because they set the pace and direction and thus ultimately shaped the nature of U.S. dominance." (7) Yet not all U.S. Presidents are equally successful in Hunt's assessment with initiating "Grand Projects" of expansion and managing the consequences of ascendancy. Although Hunt is not uncritical of any president and recognizes the enduring importance of those like Woodrow Wilson who had the biggest dreams that were doomed to failure (57-62), the author does seem to prefer Republican managers such as William McKinley who made the most of the opportunities in the Caribbean and Pacific in 1898, the corporatist approach of Republican leaders in the 1920s towards Europe, their retrenchment in Latin American from Wilsonian interventions, and their cautious approach in East Asia: "They found new ways to sustain U.S. dominance in Latin America, while handling Europe and East Asia with a shrewd caution appropriate to regions too important to neglect but too dangerous to embrace. At the same time the policy elite presided over a vital, resilient economy, a maturing consumer model, and a large accumulation of capital that taken together gave the country unrivaled economic and cultural clout." (113-114) Hunt seems to prefer more cautious managers of the U.S. ascendancy who avoid advancing and abandoning impossible objectives such as Franklin D. Roosevelt's quest on self-determination versus European colonialism (197-198) or who, such as John F. Kennedy, equivocate too much in dealing with independence in Africa. (207-208)

3.) The Cold War which occupies such a central role in the literature on U.S. diplomacy plays a somewhat secondary role in Hunt's study. In summarizing the end of the Cold War, Hunt suggests that it was a "striking mismatch" since it was "regulated by relative economic power more than anything else. So far ahead was the U.S. economy in both size and sophistication that the Cold War might be summarized as begun by the United States, dominated from the outset by the United States, and won by the United States." (263) This summary judgment raises fascinating questions of why there was a Cold War, why both sides made such dangerous and expensive efforts with nuclear weapons and massive military establishments, and why it endured as long as it did with massive costs to many participants, particularly in contested Third World countries that could least afford it?

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Hunt's pithy summation also points to the recent emphasis in the literature from different perspectives to the role of ideology in the origins and duration of the Cold War.

4.) One of the most stimulating chapters is "In the American Image, 1941-1968" in which Hunt shifts from the earlier movement from the foundations of ascendancy to 1968 to explore the effort of U.S. leaders to create an international regime based on U.S. values and preferences in many different areas. Hunt moves far beyond the familiar UN and Bretton Woods system and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, free trade and GAAT negotiations to a less familiar emphasis on protecting the individual versus the state in the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials of war leaders to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.(153-162) Hunt's development of the U.S. as a model of modernity with its consumerism backed by Western Europe and Japanese allies with Coca-Cola and Hollywood leading the challenge to the Soviet Union and French traditionalists. This chapter definitely reinforces Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* and its emphasis on the Soviet Union and the U.S. offering competing models of modernity.

5.) What does Hunt note as the major challenges to U.S. global dominance by 1968? The Third World challenge is explored in Chapter VI as a reaction against all forms of imperial control, as a challenge to U.S. policy of backing corporate interests and "assuring access to resources critical to an industrial economy," and a concern about radicals joining the Soviet camp in the Cold War. (190) Hunt also suggests that American leaders intensified the challenge with a "cultural animosity rooted in the American experience as a settler society and reflected in earlier phases of U.S. involvement in Latin American and East Asia…. U.S. policymakers and observers carried strong assumptions about third-world immaturity that inspirited doubts that colonial peoples could wisely mange their independence and resources." (190) Does this cultural perspective have the same degree of significance in examining U.S. attitudes and policy on Fidel Castro in Cuba, the response from Eisenhower to Nixon on new African states, and in Asia with respect to Vietnam, or do Cold War calculations have far more impact in how Washington responded to Castro and the Vietnam conflict?

6.) By 1968 Hunt emphasizes the challenges to U.S. ascendancy as he affirms the prescience of columnist Walter Lippmann's warning about pursuing containment on a global scale with Vietnam as the leading example of the costs which intensified as the international environment changed with nuclear proliferation, increasing Third World shifts to the left and enhanced relationships with the Soviet Union, China and Castro's Cuba, generational challenges at home and in Western Europe, and economic problems. In evaluating the response of Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan to these challenges, Hunt is more critical of Carter than either Republican. "With no organizing vision at the outset to pull the pieces of his policy together or supply priorities, Hunt concludes, "Carter was vulnerable to confusion and drift, became lost in details, and could sound no clarion call to win public support in economically troubled times. His reliance on senior advisers with distinctly different points of view compounded his own conceptual

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confusion." (246) Although critical of Richard Nixon for clinging to the Cold War, Hunt does suggest that "as clearly as any leader of the time, Nixon grasped the new challenges to U.S. dominance. His tattered reputation … should not blind us to his insights and studied attempt to construct a more modest and thus sustainable Cold War policy." (239) Hunt is less impressed with Ronald Reagan's lack of understanding of policy issues; however, he notes that Reagan, despite appointing militant Cold Warriors to important positions, remained cautious and limited by political constraints, and shrewd enough to recognize the opportunities offered by Mikhail Gorbachev and to side with Secretary of State George Shultz against the militants.

7.) In Chapter VIII, "The Neoliberal Triumph 1991," Hunt reverts back to 19th century classical liberal doctrine to capture the perspective of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and their advisers, and he makes a plausible case for emphasizing their similarities under this term as opposed to the more familiar Neo-Conservatism applied to Bush and his militant advisers. Hunt's chapter corresponds with Tony Smith's *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise*, recently reviewed in an H-Diplo roundtable.[2] In several chapters Smith traces the shifts in liberal internationalism since Woodrow Wilson and explores the development of neoliberalism and its increasing convergence with neoconservatism with the last difference being a preference for multilateralism versus unilateralism. With neoliberal endorsement of the Bush Doctrine in 2002 and the Iraq war, Smith concludes that the differences had become insignificant. Smith does suggest that President Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney and other White House advisers had their own considerations separate from neoconservatives and neoliberals. However, Smith does emphasize Bush's incorporation of neoliberal thinking from 2002 through 2006.[3] Regardless of terminology, Hunt provides a stimulating assessment of the dimensions of dominance led by an increasing emphasis on a Wilsonian belief in promoting freedom with military force if necessary under the guidance of military and corporate leaders. What Hunt emphasizes is a full flowering of early beliefs and trends in the U.S. ascendancy, cataloged as global policemen, regime manager over the international economy, go-it-alone versus the UN. The pitfalls in this quest included domestic dysfunction in a public resistant to sacrifice, public concerns, and the neoliberal agenda as well as increasing doubts and dislike for U.S. hegemony in Europe, Russia, East Asia, and the Middle East.

8.) So where does Hunt stand on the $64 question of whether or not the U.S. ascendancy is an empire?[4] In his conclusion Hunt addresses the issue, noting how the U.S. moved from its origins to the 21st century through a number of different stages. Hunt recognizes the presence of imperial activities, rationales, and problems in current Bush policies toward

[2] H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise,* by Thomas Maddux, Robert Jervis, Bruce Kuklick, Doug Macdonald, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro. Volume VIII, No 14 (2007), published 7 November 2007. http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#8.14 .

[3] See Smith, 14-23, 43-44, 190-193.

[4] For a brief summary of Hunt's perspective, see Michael H. Hunt, "Empire, Hegemony, and U.S. Policy Mess," History News Network, http://www.hnn.us/articles/37486.html .

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Afghanistan and Iraq as well as in Latin America, East Asia, and Europe. However, Hunt suggests that empire does not capture the U.S. role with respect to the "unprecedented geographical scope and depth of U.S. influence." (311) What Hunt prefers is hegemon, although he concludes with a warning about the possibility of decline and points to the neoliberal preoccupation with a marketplace vision as the most identifiable threat to acceptance of the U.S. as a legitimate hegemon: "States claiming hegemony have a special obligation of stewardship. The greater their claim, the greater their obligation to promote global prosperity and safety in ways that are in fact effective and perceived as such. By neglecting its responsibilities with regard to these most critical of human problems, the United States runs the risk of losing legitimacy as architect and keeper of global order." (320) What Hunt recommends is a retreat from hegemony to cooperation, an approach that the President Bush may be pressured to follow as militants have retreated from the White House and its branches, and unresolved conflicts persist on the frontiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Participants:

Michael H. Hunt is the Everett H. Emerson Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. After taking his undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, he did his graduate work in the history department at Yale. He took his Ph.D. in 1971. He taught at Yale and Colgate before moving to North Carolina in 1980. Professor Hunt writes and teaches in the general field of international history. His special teaching and research interests are in U.S. foreign relations, the Cold War in Asia, the Vietnam War, and the post-1945 world. His early work, focusing on nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese-American relations, includes two prize-winning books, *Frontier Defense and the Open Door* (1973) and *The Making of a Special Relationship* (1983; Chinese translation) as well as a prize-winning article, "Americans in the China Market," *Business History Review* 48 (Autumn 1977). His long-term concern with U.S. foreign relations is reflected in several broad interpretive, historiographical, and methodological works, notably *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987); "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992); and *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy: An International History Reader* (1996). He has also cultivated an interest in modern East Asia, resulting in *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (1996), based on new sources, and *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam*, 1945- 1968 (1996), a slim synthesis. His recent interest in contemporary global history has led to *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (2003) and a companion reader. He has also been collaborating with Steven I. Levine on an account of America's wars in Asia.

Andrew J. Bacevich is professor of international relations and history at Boston University. A graduate of the U. S. Military Academy, he received his Ph. D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University. Dr. Bacevich is the author most recently of *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005). His previous books include *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy* (2002)

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and *The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire* (2003). His essays and reviews have appeared in a wide variety of scholarly and general interest publications including *The Wilson Quarterly, The National Interest, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The Nation, The American Conservative*, and *The New Republic*.

Alfred Eckes is Ohio Eminent Research Professor in Contemporary History at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. He graduated from Washington and Lee University (BA); the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (MA), and the University of Texas at Austin (Ph.D.) From 1981 to 1990 he was a Commissioner (and Chairman) of the U.S. International Trade Commission. He is currently Executive Vice President of the International Trade and Finance Association and Editor-in-Chief of the *Global Economy Journal*, published by Berkeley Electronic Press. His books include *Opening America's Market* (North Carolina, 1995) and *Globalization and the American Century* (Cambridge 2003) with Thomas Zeiler. He is currently writing a book on the Contemporary Global Economy since the 1970s to be published in Blackwell's History of the Contemporary World series.

Stephen G. Rabe has completed thirty years of teaching at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he has been named Arts & Humanities Professor. He has taught and lectured in thirteen counties, having served as the Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College, Dublin (1990-91) and the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki (2005-06). During the summers, he has also directed seminars on modern U.S. history in Argentina and Brazil (2003-06). Rabe's latest book is *The U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (2005). A previous book, *Eisenhower and Latin America* (1988) won the Bernath Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) for the outstanding book in the field of international relations. SHAFR also named him the Bernath Lecturer in 1989. Rabe serves on the Executive Council of SHAFR. At present, Rabe is working on three books: a history of John F. Kennedy's foreign policies for Potomac Press; a history on the United States, Latin America, and the Cold War for Oxford University Press; and a textbook on U.S. relations with Latin America for Blackwell Press.

Thomas Zeiler is professor of history and chair of the Department of History at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He graduated from Emory University (BA) and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (MA and Ph.D.). His books include *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (2004); *Globalization and the American Century*, co-authored with Alfred E. Eckes, Jr. (2003); *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (2000); *Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT* (1999); *American Trade and Power in the 1960s* (1992). He has a forthcoming book on *World War II: A Global History* (2007) and has completed a manuscript on "Global Games: The Spalding World Tour of 1888/1889". Professor Zeiler is Executive Editor of *Diplomatic History*.

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Review by Andrew Bacevich, Boston University

Perhaps I'm just in a sour mood, but what strikes me most about Michael H. Hunt's new book *The American Ascendancy* is its complete and utter irrelevance.

Let me hasten to emphasize that I find much about the book to admire. In terms of substance, my disagreements hardly rise to the level of quibbles. I happily endorse Hunt's central thesis. "In each phase of the national history," he writes, "U. S. leaders matched national ambitions to material resources and made the choices that moved the country forward toward an ever more formidable global position." (p. 3)

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The language may not exactly sizzle, but the point is essentially correct: the United States emerged as a dominant power because it consistently sought power in all its forms, territorial, commercial, political, cultural, and military. The central theme of U. S. foreign policy is expansionism, sometimes cool (when Wall Street lawyers call the shots), sometimes hot (when the Wilsonians are in charge). There have been dissenters, of course, "hostile to empire, averse to war, devoted to domestic priorities"–so three cheers for Mark Twain, Randolph Bourne, and W. A. Williams. Yet as Hunt observes, over time these critics "fell silent or retreated to the margins of political life." (p. 5) (A careful editor might have changed "retreated" to "were confined.")

By the mid-point of the twentieth century—the "American Century"!—this expansionist project had achieved stunning results, although not because Americans are virtuous or because they enjoy God's favor (God Himself having been notably silent on that point). The keys to success have been ruthlessness, flexibility, opportunism, and determination combined with an abundance of material and human resources. The cherry atop the cupcake is ideology—America as the exemplar of liberty and later as its chief promoter and protector—which statesmen have employed to justify expansion, discipline the great unwashed, and perhaps salve their own consciences.

Who could disagree with the basic validity of this interpretation? Yet apart perhaps from readers of H-Diplo who cares? In the real world, the viewpoint expressed in *The American Ascendancy* has about as much salience as appeals for chastity. What Hunt is selling, his countrymen aren't buying.

Let me illustrate the point by noting three judgments offered by Professor Hunt, each one of which is, in my own view, not only indisputably valid, but also hugely important:

1. At the outset of the twentieth century, "Americans began to define themselves in terms of what they consumed rather than as they had formerly, in terms of what they produced. Self-gratification became the new touchstone for the good life, in place of thrift, social virtue, or religious morality." (pp. 84-85)

2. Responding to the ostensible demands of the Cold War "Congress took a back seat to the person of the president, who commanded general deference as the embodiment of the nation in a semipermanent state of war." These arrangements remain "a defining feature of U. S. political life." (p. 140)

3. At the present moment, the exercise of "hegemony may hurt the hegemon," leading, as it does, to "the privileging of corporate interests harmful to public welfare, a fixation with military power that amounts to a national obsession, an increasingly infantilized and inert public, and the rise of an imperial presidency antithetical to genuine democracy." (p. 322)

Now if, in the forthcoming national elections, one of the two major candidates were to embrace these propositions and cite them as reasons to overhaul U. S. policy we might have an interesting debate about the country's future. But this is about as likely to happen as a call for tax increases and entitlement cuts.

Any candidate daring to question America's love affair with conspicuous consumption, connecting the dots between the concentration of power in the executive branch and the perpetual crises in which we find ourselves mired, or finding fault with (or even acknowledging) American global hegemony would be, as they say, toast.

American politics allows little room for such uncomfortable truths. As a consequence, what we get from our politicians are clichés about leadership, promises to strengthen our military and to reinvigorate the "the global war on terrorism," and, of course, warnings about the ever-present dangers of appeasement and isolationism. (Professor Hunt himself takes several whacks at the hardy perennial of isolationism, alive and well over a half-century after Williams wrote his famous essay exposing the legend. It's an exercise in futility: the I-word remains the one thing the typical undergraduate "knows" for sure about U. S. foreign policy prior to 1941.)

Professor Hunt's concluding discussion of what he calls the "Neoliberal Triumph" shows a nice appreciation for the contradictions that have piled up during the course of the American Century and especially since the end of the Cold War—debt, dependence, alienation, a withered definition of citizenship, and a tendency to see war as America's strong suit. To say that others have made similar points does not make his own rendition

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any less worthy. The problem is that no one's listening and they won't listen absent some calamity too awful even to contemplate.

The words of Alfred E. Newman have become the American motto: What, me worry? In a contest that pits Hunt against Newman, the great Alfred E. wins hands down.

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Review by Alfred E. Eckes, Ohio University

In this impressive synthesis Michael Hunt endeavors to explain how the U.S. gained and wielded global dominance during the 20th century. He argues that wealth, confidence, and leadership are the keys to understanding how a "weak and insignificant country" (p. 2) rose to first place among nations and managed to remain there. The "leading role in the American ascendancy," (p. 7) he attributes to the rise of the state—or the American central government—and its expanding bureaucracy. He credits three generations of leaders, beginning with William McKinley and Woodrow Wilson, then the interwar Republicans, and last Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, for setting the pace and direction of a process that led to U.S. dominance. He also focuses on the critical role of an Eastern Anglo-Saxon leadership elite—individuals such as Henry L. Stimson and Dean Acheson—who guided America's rise to world power.

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While I find the author's interpretation stimulating, I have some concerns about his analysis and its supporting evidence. To begin with, Hunt's statist interpretation of American ascendancy is provocative, but not entirely convincing. He would benefit from the insights of institutional economists, like Cambridge University economist Ha-Joon Chang, a native of Korea, who has written extensively on the state and economic development. In his award winning book, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*, Ha-Joon Chang disputes the interpretations of deductive neo-classical economists who stress the importance of free markets and free trade in national development. Instead, surveying the economic history of various nations, he shows how government institutions and bureaucracies were critical to national economic ascendancy. This was especially true with regard to Japan, South Korea, and several other Asian countries. But, for the U.S. it was not bureaucracy so much as high tariffs for industry, and a legal system that protected property rights and encouraged innovation and entrepreneurship. In the U.S. a lenient approach to bankruptcy encouraged risk-taking more than in Western Europe where business debtors often ended their careers in prison.

While the expanding state was an factor in America's ascendancy, I think that Hunt exaggerates its influence. One reason for this may be that the author seems to have misinterpreted some of the key data. He asserts (p. 5) that "central government spending

in most developed countries amounts to an impressive 40 to 50 percent of the total annual output of goods and services." For this claim his source is Angus Maddison's study for the *OECD, The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*. In point of fact, Maddison considered "total government expenditures," not simply "central government spending," and his data are limited to only six developed countries—four in Western Europe, the United States and Japan. The experiences of France, Germany and the Netherlands, three countries with relatively high levels of state spending, seem to bias his conclusions. Interestingly, for the United States, Maddison's data show total government spending not exceeding 31.1 percent of GDP (gross domestic product) in any of the periods studied. For this reason, I believe that Hunt has overestimated the significance of the federal government to American development. Indeed, Maddison's data may suggest another conclusion. When the size of government is correlated with growth of GDP, some readers may spot a negative relationship. Maddison's limited sample seems to show slower rates of economic growth when government spending reaches 40 to 50 percent of total output than at lower levels.

If the state has been less significant in the U.S. than in some other countries, what explains America's economic vitality? I think that Hunt might give more attention to American-style capitalism which flourished until the mid-20th century with little government oversight of corporations and few protections for labor. Also, important was a legal system that protected property rights and encouraged entrepreneurial risk-taking. Strong patent laws benefitted inventors and lenient bankruptcy laws enabling risk takers to escape their mistakes and try again. Rather than focusing narrowly on the role of an elite foreign-policy elite who helped spend taxes, perhaps historians seeking to understand America's rise to a dominant global position should be paying more attention to the inventors and entrepreneurs with bold ideas who created wealth. These energetic individuals developed new products, and then produced and marketed them successfully to consumers around the world. Victoria de Grazia also emphasizes the important role that entrepreneurs and businesses had in forging an American "market empire" based on consumerism in her *Irresistible Empir*e, winner of the 2005 Bernath Prize.

Many of these business leaders and entrepreneurs—and some foreign governments—also used the power of their purses to lobby the American state and influence its future priorities. In my view, Michael Hunt's interpretation of American ascendancy gives too little attention to the role of lobbyists and Congress. He tends to see them as "secondary characters" (p. 7) operating "in close collaboration with the state authorities." The reality that I encountered during my eleven years in Washington, working for Congress and in two presidential administrations, was quite different. If prepared to contribute substantial sums of money to political parties and candidates for public office, lobbyists can influence the nation's public policies in myriad, and sometimes mysterious, ways, frequently overcoming the opposition of more detached decisionmakers.

Next, let me challenge several other interpretations in Hunt's book. He refers repeatedly to the American quest for free trade beginning in the 1930s with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. But, Hull, and his followers, denied they were "free traders." Instead, they simply

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wanted to lower, but not remove, tariff barriers in order to expand trade. I believe this is an important distinction. Until President Ronald Reagan committed the U.S. to a policy of promoting free trade, the U.S. had pursued a policy of gradual trade liberalization, first in goods and then in services.

Regarding Bretton Woods and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), there are some spurious claims. Hunt asserts that Bretton Woods established a "commitment to free trade" (p. 164) and that Congress agreed to GATT in 1947. Neither is correct. For years the Executive Branch treated GATT as an intergovernmental contract, not an executive agreement or treaty, in order to circumvent Congress. And, while Hunt argues that GATT did not "begin to demonstrate its capacity to lower international barrier to trade" until the early 1960s, some of the most important tariff reductions occurred in the first post-war negotiations, though not all parties to GATT could implement these obligations at the time (p. 165).

On foreign aid, Hunt recycles the conventional wisdom that U.S. giving lags considerably behind other donor nations. It is true that U.S. official aid has declined from its post-World War II high, but arguably the rapid growth of private capital flows, remittances, and philanthropy more than compensate. Indeed, according to the Hudson Institute's *Index of Global Philanthropy*, U.S. giving, as a share of gross national income, ranks near the top of donor countries, not near the bottom, with 0.98% of national income, well above the Millennium Development Goal of 0.7%.

Despite such shortcomings, I do like Hunt's book. Writing a synthesis over such a sweeping period of change is extraordinarily difficult, as I know from a prior effort. I find his interpretations stimulating and many of his conclusions—particularly those related to globalization and pernicious influence of some neo-liberal economists—on target. From my standpoint, his splendid bibliographical essay is an excellent introduction to much of the recent writings on key aspects of American foreign relations and globalization.

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Review by Stephen G. Rabe, University of Texas at Dallas

Hunt and the Historians

It is an honor to be asked to comment on one of Professor Michael H. Hunt's books. As one of the great historians of U.S. foreign relations, Hunt is in a league with luminaries such as Walter LaFeber, Warren Cohen, John Lewis Gaddis, George Herring, Michael Hogan, Thomas G. Paterson and the late William Appleman Williams. My graduate students always read at the beginning of the semester, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987), Hunt's path breaking analysis of the intellectual roots of United States (U.S.) foreign policy. *Lyndon Johnson's War* (1996) is a constant companion for students who take my course on the American experience in Vietnam. The second chapter of that book, "Ho Chi Minh's Brocade Bags," represents a brilliant, concise explanation of the political genius of the Vietnamese leader and why the United States, with its "stark failure of cultural imagination," would be unlikely to accomplish its goals in Vietnam. Early in his career, Hunt had established his scholarly reputation with studies such as *Frontier Defense and the Open Door* (1973) and *Making of a Special Relationship* (1983). In both of these books on U.S.-Chinese relations, Hunt conducted multi-archival research and displayed a keen appreciation and sensitivity to Chinese history and culture.

Stephen G. Rabe *has completed thirty years of teaching at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he has been named Arts & Humanities Professor. He has taught and lectured in thirteen counties, having served as the Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College, Dublin (1990-91) and the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki (2005-06). During the summers, he has also directed seminars on modern U.S. history in Argentina and Brazil (2003-06). Rabe's latest book is* The U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story *(2005). A previous book, Eisenhower and Latin America (1988) won the Bernath Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) for the outstanding book in the field of international relations. SHAFR also named him the Bernath Lecturer in 1989. Rabe serves on the Executive Council of SHAFR. At present, Rabe is working on three books: a history of John F. Kennedy's foreign policies for Potomac Press; a history on the United States, Latin America, and the Cold War for Oxford University Press; and a textbook on U.S. relations with Latin America for Blackwell Press.*

In *The American Ascendancy*, much as in *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Hunt moves beyond his subfield of U.S.-Asian relations and offers a general interpretation of the U.S. role in the world. As Hunt notes in the introduction, he believes that historians have been left out of the post-Cold War debate over the proper role of the United States in the world. His goal is to offer an "overarching" narrative that outlines the decisions taken and the historical developments that led the United States to its present ascendancy in the world. Much as when he was working on his *Ideology* book, Hunt writes during a time of perceived crisis in international relations. In the first part of the 1980s, the Ronald Reagan administration's belligerent rhetoric toward the Soviet Union, its massive military buildup, shocking deficit spending, and unspeakably cruel interventions in Central America alarmed scholars and citizens. In the same year that *Ideology* appeared, Paul Kennedy published

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987), warning about imperial overreach and the perils of undermining domestic economies with excessive military spending and unwise foreign adventures. In "The Contemporary Dilemma," the closing chapter of *Ideology*, Hunt suggested that the nation return to its republican ideals and restrain its impulses to refashion the world in the U.S. image. The greatness of the United States "should be measured against domestic conditions." Hunt added: "with the glories of empire come its costs."[1] *The American Ascendancy* arrives during the time of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, which may prove to be the greatest blunder in the history of U.S. foreign relations. As the compelling documentary film by Charles Ferguson informs us, when it comes to the Iraq fiasco, there appears to be *No End in Sight* (2007).

Hunt's core theses are straightforward. The basis for the sustained U.S. success in international affairs was wealth, confidence, and leadership. Throughout its history, the United States has enjoyed material wealth and generated critical technological advances, creating a premier economy. Between 1820 and 1913, the United States economy grew at an annual rate of 4 percent, easily surpassing the growth rates of European countries. This wealth helped fuel a powerful sense of nationalism and destiny. Self-confident elites, usually from the cultural milieu of the educated, middle- and upper-income groups in the Northeastern states, reflected this sense of pride and privilege and guided the nation's expansion. As they accumulated national and international power, the guiding elites fashioned a modern, powerful state capable of securing and enhancing U.S. gains in the international arena.

Professor Hunt offers his book for public debate and surely would like to see his book adopted in undergraduate and graduate courses in U.S. history. As such, it might be useful to put *American Ascendancy* within the context of other authors and books that try to reach a broad audience and offer a synthesis about the U.S. role in the world. On one level, Hunt's topic—how the United States gained and wielded global dominance—is a traditional one. As Alexander DeConde noted over thirty years ago in a pamphlet on the historiography of American diplomatic history that he prepared for the American Historical Association, the "theme of expanding American power in the context of international politics" is a familiar one.[2] Political scientists suggest that about 20 percent of the U.S. public pays attention to international affairs and only a minuscule percent of the population is actually in a position to affect foreign policy. I suspect that many who are internationally literate first gained their knowledge and interests by taking a course on U.S. diplomatic history (renamed U.S. foreign relations) in college/university. The theme of expanding U.S. power is the narrative motif of virtually every textbook currently used in courses on U.S. foreign relations. Thomas Paterson in the sixth edition of *American Foreign Relations* (2005) reiterated that "we continue to emphasize the theme of expansionism, explaining its many

[1] Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987): 189-98.

[2] Alexander DeConde, *American Diplomatic History in Transformation*, American Historical Association Pamphlet 702 (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1976): 6.

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manifestations." The editor of *Diplomatic History*, Robert D. Schulzinger, opens his *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900* with the statement that "American foreign policy since the Spanish-American War of 1898 has sought to ensure U.S. supremacy in the Western Hemisphere while at the same time asserting American influence widely around the globe" (5th ed., 2002). Walter LaFeber notes that the "most obvious theme" of his textbook *The American Age* (2nd ed., 1994) is "landed and commercial expansion." I and my classmate and friend, Frank Costigliola of the University of Connecticut, learned our diplomatic history in the 1960s from the good David Millar of Hamilton College, who assigned Thomas Bailey's *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (10th ed., 1976). Bailey similarly focused on the growth of U.S. power or, as he dubbed it, "from colonies to colossus."

The periodization that Hunt offers in the first half of *American Ascendancy* would also strike most as well within the bounds of familiar interpretations. Textbooks and courses on U.S. foreign relations usually begin with the imperial surge at the end of the nineteenth century.[3] But introductory chapters and lectures tie the burst of activity from 1895 to 1904 (Venezuelan Boundary Crisis to the Panama Canal) to nineteenth-century territorial expansion, rejecting the hoary thesis of Samuel Flagg Bemis that U.S. imperialism was an "aberration" in U.S. history. Alexander DeConde, for example, in his preface to the second volume, *Global Power*, of *A History of American Foreign Policy* (3rd ed., 1978) asserts that the seizure of the Philippines "came in another burst of expansionist fervor, an overseas imperialism called the new manifest destiny." Hunt similarly ties the rise of U.S. imperial power to the nineteenth-century developments, emphasizing the consolidation of settler societies, the sweeping aside of indigenous civilizations, the rise of global capitalism, and the expansion of a state-dominated nationalism. Hunt would affirm Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's boast that the United States had "a record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century."[4]

Chapters three and four, covering the period from 1898 to 1940, of *American Ascendancy* further affirm established interpretations of U.S. foreign relations. Hunt portrays President William McKinley as a critical figure, an effective president, and an architect of U.S. international power, thereby agreeing with interpretations offered by H. Wayne Morgan, Louis Gould, and R. Hal Williams among others. Unlike McKinley, President Woodrow Wilson sought to dismantle the imperial system and replace it with a U.S.-designed system of democratic, peaceful, commercial states. Wilson, for Hunt, is the prophet of a globally assertive foreign policy, articulating a vision of global integration and prosperity with U.S. leadership. The self-confidence and self-righteousness that informed the Fourteen Points echoed nineteenth-century concepts of manifest destiny. For me, Hunt's Wilson is the leader analyzed in N. Gordon Levin's *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* (1968). Hunt also draws on prevailing analyses of the interwar period, refuting "the legend of isolationism,"

[3] The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) has a website with course syllabi. See http://www.shafr.org/syllabusinitiative.htm .

[4] Lodge quoted in Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995): 104.

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as William Appleman Williams characterized it in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959). During the 1920s, foreign-policy elites extended the economic and cultural clout of the United States, offering a model of modernity based on consumerism.

In his three chapters, which are all on the period from 1941 to 1968, Hunt takes a unique approach. Textbooks always separate the war years of 1941 to 1945 into a distinct chapter. Courses on the "United States since 1945" have become commonplace in higher education. Such curricular choices reflect popular views that the United States emerged from World War II as a dominant power in the aftermath of Europe's self-destruction and that U.S. postwar foreign policy revolved around the momentous confrontation with the Soviet Union. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki often serves as a metaphor to herald the closing of one era and the beginning of a new, perilous age. Hunt insightfully intertwines World War II with the first half of the Cold War, because he believes that the crusades against German Nazism, Italian fascism, Japanese militarism, and Soviet communism accelerated the drive toward a strong state under the leadership of a powerful, "imperial" president. A strong, activist president employing the new military technologies developed during World War II and under the aegis of NSC 68/2 (1950) secured the geopolitical dominance of the United States. But during the period from 1941 to 1968, the United States went beyond establishing its political and military dominion. U.S. citizens had arrived in President Harry Truman's words, at the "ascendancy of their strength." U.S. foreign policy leaders redesigned the international system to make it congruent with U.S. values. The Nuremburg war crimes trials, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and the Bretton Woods international economic system all challenged the four-hundred-year-old international system of sovereign states established under the Peace of Westphalia (1648). The Wilsonian visions, consumer capitalism, and U.S. cultural power had been successfully wedded to the awesome military and technological might of the United States.

Starting a new section in 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive and President Lyndon Johnson's resignation, indicates that Professor Hunt considers the debacle in Vietnam a watershed in the history of U.S. foreign relations. In his previous chapter, "Third-World Challenge," Hunt argued that the United States had largely beat back the national liberation movements that had erupted in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America in the post-1941 period. In Latin America, my area of scholarly interest, U.S. officials used covert interventions and economic and military aid to undermine leftist and nationalistic movements in Guatemala, Bolivia, Brazil, British Guiana, and the Dominican Republic. The capture and execution of the Argentine/Cuban revolutionary, Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, in the Bolivian countryside in 1967 underscored that triumph. Whereas Cold War fears motivated U.S. interventions, a sense of cultural superiority, as Hunt indicates, also underlay the U.S. approach. Latin Americans, like other Third World people, had "immature" political and economic attitudes and systems and needed to "modernize" with development programs like the Alliance for Progress (1961-69). As Hunt previously indicated in *Lyndon Johnson's War*, cultural arrogance underlay the U.S. experience in Vietnam, for U.S. officials failed to respect what Ho Chi Minh carried in his brocade bags.

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Beyond the obvious strains that the Vietnam debacle put on U.S. society, a variety of other pressures "disoriented" the United States in the period from 1968 to 1991. Declining economic competitiveness brought about by overspending on the military-industrial complex and nuclear weapons and the return of Western Europe and Japan to the global market place sapped U.S. economic strength. The U.S. public also became less enamored of the U.S. empire as it witnessed mounting casualties in Vietnam and a stagnant standard of living. Hunt returns to a theme he had first raised in his *Ideology* book—a striking appreciation for the ideas of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. With their initiatives toward the Soviet Union and China, the duo tried "to construct a more modest and thus sustainable Cold War policy" (239). The Nixon administration's balance of power approach signaled an accommodation with other powers and perhaps a tacit admission that the U.S. lacked the power or wisdom to transform the world. Restraint did not, however, characterize the Ronald Reagan administration's rejuvenation of the Cold War. As Hunt sees it, Reagan, with his massive military buildup and confrontational policies, was bound to widen the fissures in U.S. political and economic life that had first appeared in the 1960s. Mikhail Gorbachev saved Reagan from himself. Hunt rejects the boasts of the "euphoria school" of conservative pundits like Francis Fukuyama that Reagan's strong international stands brought about the "evil empire's" demise. The mismatch in economic power among the superpowers determined the course and conduct of the Cold War

Professor Hunt's economic interpretation of the Cold War calls attention to his consistent emphasis on the wealth of the United States in ascertaining the sources of the U.S. approach to the world. Like the famous "revisionist" or "Wisconsin School" of diplomatic historians who emerged in the 1960s—Williams, LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, Thomas McCormick—Hunt stresses the primacy of domestic social and economic structures in explaining the American ascendancy. Such an approach tends to downplay power relationships among states in explaining sources of foreign policies. Unlike the Wisconsin school, however, Hunt suggests that U.S. expansion came not as a capitalist drive for markets and wealth to alleviate socioeconomic inequalities at home but rather as a consequence of domestic wealth. In a peculiar way, Hunt seems very close to the "Consensus School" of historians, like David M. Potter in *People of Plenty* (1954), who argued that material abundance shaped the national character and created a unique U.S. society. An intrinsically wealthy nation presumably could accept differences and diversity and pursue a restrained foreign policy. But Hunt is clearly not a member of the Consensus School. Like William Appleman Williams, Hunt suggests that the wealth of the nation provides the United States the opportunity to create a socially just society that would garner international admiration.

A plea for restraint permeates both the final chapter, which is on "neo-liberalism" since 1991, and the conclusion. The gloom that permeates the final chapter in *Ideology* returns at the end of *American Ascendancy*. The U.S. debacle in Iraq weighs heavily on the scholarly mind. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century republican thought warned that "crusades conducted in the name of freedom, threatened freedom at home." Recalling the fates of Athens and Rome, Hunt adds that "history showed that foreign entanglements and

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adventures created dangerous concentrations of political power within and undermined the very civic virtues on which the survival of any republic depended" (322-23). The United States has established its global "hegemony." Hunt beautifully explains why neo-conservative pundits and scholars like Max Boot and Niall Ferguson are misusing the term "empire" when they defend the contemporary American ascendancy. The U.S. model of modernity still reigns supreme. But Hunt sees a U.S. public increasingly weary of the costs and responsibilities of hegemony. The international legitimacy that must accompany hegemony is also being eroded by a U.S. failure to address pressing global concerns like climate change, hunger, and population growth.

In the end, Hunt's history of the growth of U.S. power is really a call for U.S. citizens to assess the costs both to themselves and others of its contemporary ascendancy. I cannot predict whether this book sparks the public debate about the U.S. role in the world that Hunt desires. As Hunt concedes, both political elites and the U.S. public "know little of the broader world and are largely oblivious to the historical and cultural forces that have shaped it" (315). What I can promise is that *American Ascendancy*, with its compelling theses and its engagement with other historians, will serve as an excellent capstone reading in my courses on the history of U.S. foreign relations.

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Review by Thomas W. Zeiler, University of Colorado at Boulder

Neoconservativism, the George W. Bush administration, and the Iraq War (and related war on terrorism) have really ticked off the scholarly community, historians prominently among them. The dissent runs from a mere shaking of one's head in sorrow and disgust to censure in class, demonstrations, and print. Michael Hunt, one of diplomatic history's most eminent and insightful scholars, is among the critics. That is clear from the first paragraph on this superb book's dust jacket, which promises analysis over triumphalism, to the conclusion that discusses the challenges that lie ahead in foreign policy, the pitfalls of neoconservatism (and its umbrella concept, neoliberalism), and the need for America to retreat wisely and prudently from its hegemonic global position.

Thomas Zeiler *is professor of history and chair of the Department of History at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He graduated from Emory University (BA) and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (MA and Ph.D.). His books include* Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II *(2004);* Globalization and the American Century, *co-authored with Alfred E. Eckes, Jr. (2003);* Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad *(2000);* Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT *(1999);* American Trade and Power in the 1960s *(1992). He has a forthcoming book on World War II:* A Global History *(2007) and has completed a manuscript on "Global Games: The Spalding World Tour of 1888/1889". Professor Zeiler is Executive Editor of Diplomatic History.*

This latter plea is fundamental to Hunt's work, which is a careful history of how the United States rose to the pinnacle of world domination since its founding. His perceptive, elegantly written history of the past 200 or so years (with an emphasis on the post-Pearl Harbor era, covered in five of the eight chapters) explains the emergence of a country bolstered by a powerful economy, expansionist ideology, solid leadership, strong government institutions, and fortuitous timing—namely, the general decline of Europe as the center of hegemonic power. Yet Hunt—who has taken on large topics before (his *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* of 20 years ago is nothing short of a classic of diplomatic history)—is no whining protester regarding the rise of the American empire (a term he rejects as simplistic) and current conundrums in the U.S. war on terrorism. He seeks not to jump on the bandwagon of Bush-bashing (though he is clearly in the opposition's camp, aligned against the so-called "militants" who back the recent imperial project), nor does he sensationalize the profound problems facing the United States in the world by throwing around the "empire" moniker in a nod to contemporary fashion. Hunt plugs into our fascination with American power and its abuses, but his arguments are complex and his evidence is solid.

Contrast his reasoned, deeply grounded interpretive study to, say, some of the latest headline-grabbers in bookstores today, such as John Perkins, *The Secret History of the American Empire: Economic Hit Men, Jackals, and the Truth about Global Corruption* (New York, 2007), which follows his lurid *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (New York, 2005)

from two years before. This book is somewhat of a recycling of William A. Williams, whose open door thesis remains valid in some quarters. Both Perkins and Hunt want to reform U.S. foreign policy and imperialistic behavior. Both see fundamental problems blocking the way to reform, and both advocate an overhaul in vision, ideas, and policies to effect change. Perkins detects conspiracies everywhere, however, led by the most devious corporate robber barons, while Hunt draws on his comprehensive knowledge of the literature, hegemonic theory, and decades of prize-winning scholarship to mold a nuanced argument that leaves the reader believing that we face some daunting challenges which we just might not be able to overcome. He is a critic, without the ideological smugness of either the right or left.

One of the strengths of his book is the global setting of America's rise to power, as well as a model of ascendancy that refers to technology, commerce, and security, as well as state-building, individuals, leadership, and sweeping, innovative conceptions. Hunt's adoption of the "settler society" as a framework that explains the roots of nineteenth century expansion is illuminating, although he does pay more attention to global trends and the international arena in the period of America's rise than he does when he lands in the twentieth century. This is logical, as European influences were, of course, of a commanding nature which had faded in their ability to shape the American nation after the First World War. Still, the book loses some of its international context when it deals with more recent times.

It is difficult, and a bit unfair, to criticize a book of such magnificent scope and, essentially, such learning, particularly because any author with the ambitious agenda of answering the fundamental question about how the United States arrived at its world standing will never fully satisfy all of us nitpickers. Hunt, however, comes very close to meeting all objections, in my opinion; this is the finest analysis of the history of American power in the field. That is not meant to slight many other excellent studies, but Hunt has gone farther than anyone in breadth, scope, and balanced tone. Just one of many insightful passages makes the case: the section on consumerism (and Americanization) as a source of U.S. strength during the Cold War (pp. 175-186) is a wonder of delicately shaded scrutiny that investigates cultural icons in music, fashion, and soft drinks, while also showing that foreigners both adopted, and co-opted, American products of abundance. In the end, the United States arrived on distant shores with its military or, in a more long-lasting way, with its stuff that the rest of the world enjoyed as much as Americans did. Hunt argues convincingly that the butter of consumerism—and trade, finance, and aid that carried it abroad—paved the way for U.S. hegemony more than guns, despite the current messy affair in Iraq.

Still, like any large-think book, this one left me with questions, and most notably, some nagging doubts regarding the details. For instance, is there a president who truly performs well? Hunt certainly appreciates the hardships facing leaders, but in placing the American ascendancy in a big model that depends on trends and large frameworks (economics, politics, etc.), the White House often seems like a place where mistakes are made. Woodrow Wilson had a good idea with his Fourteen Points, but they ultimately failed, no matter how farsighted he was, in large part due to his political bungling. Anyway, Hunt

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claims that he enhanced the possibilities of the American empire by developing an interventionist ideology and state institutions in line with American responsibilities, though we can surely debate Wilson's imperial motives. According to the author, Franklin Roosevelt was necessarily cautious in the face of isolationism, but then he turned cynical in letting the Russians fight the war in Europe until they had turned back Nazism, and made things easier for conquest in the West by the tremendous surge across the Atlantic and into Germany by the United States. That is not entirely accurate or fair to FDR, especially when considering the political resistance he experienced at home to involvement in the war. Jimmy Carter's human rights policy was a welcome change from cold realism and neglect of the Third World, but Hunt argues that he was inept—true, but Carter was also a refreshing break with the past. Hunt views Bill Clinton and his successor as pursuers of a globalization mantra that might prove as destructive to U.S. interests as beneficial, but the benefits might be emphasized a bit more. Finally, Harry Truman had much on his plate in the early Cold War, but certainly, he planned to use any advantage to prosecute that conflict and protect U.S. security as he defined it. Thus, his decision in 1950 to develop the hydrogen bomb might have been morally repellent (like his order to drop the atomic bombs in 1945), but this did not represent a "slavish devotion to exploiting new technologies . . ." (135), as Hunt writes. This seems rather simplistic. Just as possible, the H-bomb decision might also have revealed a calculated policy based on assessments (and misjudgments) of Sino-Soviet intentions, fear, and budgetary considerations. Hunt is not ungenerous to the presidents, but he does make implications that appear rather harsh at times.

A bigger question than presidential portraits relates to the nature of a hegemon. Hunt explores American foreign policy-making as it reacted to events abroad, perceptions of threats, or opportunities to exploit advantages. But he addresses much less substantially the home turf, and especially the effects of domestic support, neglect of foreign policy by the populace, and the influence of electoral politics on elites. And on one occasion, that of the 1930s road to war, he seems to turn from policy and shove aside international events and security issues for an inordinate focus on consumer issues. A closer look at three eras reveals an occasional lapse in balanced treatment of the foreign and domestic, as well as the need for some interpretative tweaking.

In his treatment of Wilsonianism, for instance, Hunt seems to bypass the fact that, despite Wilson's look ahead to the postwar peace, the country was at war. To accuse the Americans of seeking empire, no matter how beneficent, ignores the fact that state-building occurred as a means to prosecute the war. An effective and powerful presidency did not mean imperial pretensions held sway. Hunt shrewdly explains how Wilson preached with his Fourteen Points to a small elite, about 20% of the population, but he then implies that the President was a crusader who wished to assert American power, as well as his own, as "he imagined the entire world his stage" (62). But this hardly squares with the author's astute analysis of the appeal of self-determination, a Wilsonian trademark. Wilson may have been petty, but he also reacted (as Hunt rightly goes on to note) to a horrible war, dysfunctional European politics, and the Russian Bolshevik challenge. He also encountered

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political rivals as petty as he was. Some slight adjustment in tone is in order, especially through an emphasis on World War I.

The Great Depression period was a critical time for America and the world, but does a concern with the development of a consumer society really capture the essence of the decade in terms of diplomacy? Obviously, Hunt seeks to illustrate long-term trends. Also, as noted above, Hunt is right that FDR was wary in foreign policy, which a rather controlled approach to lowering barriers to commerce, under the plodding Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934, represented. But when the reader steps back and assesses Hunt's treatment of the decade, it appears as if he is trying too hard to make the case for expansion and empire, and less so for the trying security crises that Roosevelt encountered. In addition, I wish Hunt emphasized even more than he did FDR's unwillingness to push the isolationists too far. This would have placed the issues in a firmer context of domestic, as well as international, constraints.

Finally, Hunt does a good job on Nixon-Kissinger realism but he actually seems to punt on perhaps one of the most transformative events of the past thirty years: the so-called second "Nixon Shock," in which the President slammed shut the gold window, thereby stopping the convertibility of dollars into gold held by foreigners and setting the capitalist powers on the road to floating exchange rates. Hunt admits that the move, among others in the foreign economic policy arsenal, shifted "the burden of managing the international economy" partly to the shoulders of European and Japanese allies (244). But he does not go on to conclude (in order to keep with his hegemonic ascendancy theme) either that the dollar (and, hence, the United States) remained predominant over the global economy or that allies deserved to be told to share the burden of American payments for their security. Instead, we are left with an ambiguous statement that postwar economic institutions were left in place (though the Nixon Shock really heralded the end of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates) and that nations remained committed to "an open international economic system" (244), which does not sound too bad. It surely does not sound like hegemony or the exercise of imperial power on the part of the Americans.

The book then focuses us on very recent history, and the recent scholarly obsession with notions of empire. Actually, Hunt has little patience with the concept of empire, viewing it today as a way for neoliberals to excuse aggressive American policies that harm others, and the U.S. position in the world as well. He even dismisses the long-held approach of the Wisconsin School's informal empire, preferring the concept of "hegemony," a term more in vogue in the 1980s in academe (empire's trendiness is of more recent vintage). Hegemony theory portrays the United States as a much more powerful and dominating global force than does imperial ideology, but in this, I fear that Hunt is overreacting to events of the past decade or so, and certainly the post-9/11 era of mistaken foreign and military policies on the part of the neo-cons in the Bush administration. He shucks off history—the strength of the book—and turns presentist. But first off, who is to say how historians will revise their views of the Bush administration (as they have of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Reagan)? No matter how much it stretches our imagination, Bush II might undergo a scholarly revision

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in two decades that improves his reputation. Second, to be sure, as Hunt writes, "[t]he fingerprints of the United States are everywhere," (313), but he also makes a case that America was already the hegemon during and just after the Second World War. Perhaps, but then there is Charles de Gaulle, the Vietnam War, and, of course, the inability to resolve the peace in Iraq over the past four years. All undercut U.S. hegemonic power.

Hegemony is a weighty term, but it might serve us better not to quest for terminology at all, and merely explain the history as a general accretion of power on the part of the United States. Leave it at that, for using it opens Hunt up to inconsistency. For instance, America might have followed an imperial course, except in periods such as the 1870s and 1930s, when it did not. It could have been a hegemon for the past half century, save for the 1970s, when it ran out of gasoline, impotently watched as radical Islam took its diplomats hostage in Iran, and shuttled throughout the Middle East as a largely ineffective salesman for Israeli-Arab peace, except for the case of Egypt. Thus, the label does not apply across the board. Labels may or may not stick in our vocabulary; much better is history written with the talents of an author like Hunt, who largely provides us with analysis that is timeless.

While readers will readily discern Hunt's frustration with present events (and I wonder if his editor, rather than he, wanted to issue assessments of contemporary issues and judge the future as well), they should also acknowledge that this book is a marvel of research (the annotated bibliography itself is worth the price) and just plain thoughtfulness. This book has so much to offer that my criticisms pale in significance to its overwhelming excellence. Michael Hunt has produced a study that both traditionalists and new diplomatic historians—as well as the public, including politicians—should read, and read again. On my third time through, I picked up ever more golden nuggets of insights. My fourth reading should yield similar results. Students of American history will, I expect, look to this book as a standard of sweeping interpretation and information that surpasses all before it.

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Author's Response by Michael H. Hunt, University of North Carolina

I'm grateful for the thoughtful comments on *The American Ascendancy* by four distinguished colleagues and for the initiative by Thomas Maddux that has made this exchange possible. Let me focus on three big issues that the comments got me thinking about.

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Andrew Bacevich wastes no time in questioning the foremost objective of *Ascendancy*—to translate academic history into terms accessible to a broader audience. In an understandably "sour mood," he doubts whether my book and for that matter the diplomatic history enterprise has any relevance to policymaking and political debate today. There is indeed good reason to think academic historians are simply talking to each other and more generally to lament the irrelevance of serious critics—academic or otherwise—when it might have counted in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and above all on the eve of the invasion of Iraq. My impression is that many academic historians foresaw the consequences of the Iraq adventure. They not only spoke out at the time but have sustained their critique in an impressive stream of books and essays. This critical academic reaction stands in stark contrast to the failure of other national institutions to reject or check the faith-based madness gripping U.S. policy. At the very time that Americans needed to think in an informed and careful way about how to proceed in the world, the White House defined and controlled the national conversation aided by well-funded think tanks with strong ideological agendas. A mainstream media would not or could not report knowingly on the Middle East or critically on the presidency. And an ill-informed public seemed perfectly happy to leave major initiatives to presidential discretion and inside the beltway authorities. While this national meltdown may amuse generations hence, those of us who have lived through it have abundant reason for sourness. The true believers have managed

to maintain their hold on policy, political challengers speak in bland, clichéd terms, and the public expresses nothing more than a vague discontent with this state of affairs.

But a bit of historical perspective gives some ground for hope. The fantasies that have enveloped mainstream political discussions and mainstream media may dissolve with startling speed and when least expected. Think back to cases in our own times. The Cold War consensus quietly eroded in the late 1950s and early 1960s setting the stage for its rapid collapse in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis and in the context of the Vietnam War. In a similar fashion the isolation of China quietly lost appeal, first among academic specialists and then among lower-level policy makers. With the ground thus prepared, Nixon did the politically unthinkable. Almost overnight he convinced the country to accept a pariah as a legitimate power. The end of the Cold War followed a similar scenario. The Soviet Union seemed a permanent fixture and the Cold War a permanent feature on the international scene—until leaders in Moscow and Washington decided otherwise. They exploited generally unrecognized possibilities for change to turn policy on a dime.

Today the ground is again beginning to shift. Politicians and commentators of all stripes are indulging in heart-felt confessions, asking in bewilderment how they could have gone so wrong. That their answers are often shallow and self-protective is probably less important than the fact that they are asking and thus creating an opening for more probing (and more historically informed) evaluations.[1] Newspapers and journalist have already made self-criticism of their post-9/11 performance a cottage industry.[2] The voters have begun the long slow shift toward a rational calculus that we have seen before in Korea and Vietnam and in relation to the nuclear danger.

If I am right in my sense of cautious optimism, then we might think of diplomatic history not as pointless but as a preserve of rational thought that can prepare the ground for the correction following a major policy mess and a reservoir of fresh insights to facilitate the correction. Like monks in medieval monasteries, we scribble away awaiting a more enlightened time. Rather than despair, perhaps we should reaffirm our role and the importance of the university—our monastery—in this time of general institutional failure. We work in one of the few places in American life not compromised by opportunism and faith-based policy. Perhaps we should also be giving more thought to how universities

[1] Michael Ignatieff's vacuous self-criticism, "Getting Iraq Wrong," *New York Times Magazine* (online edition), 5 August 2007, reflects the studied effort by the political class to minimize the depth of the failure Iraq represents. Ignatieff caricatures academic dissent as largely "ideological" (i.e., right but for the wrong reasons) and draws from Iraq the profound lesson that policy in future should be less gullible and less emotional. The post-mortems in establishment outlets are from a historian's perspective hardly more incisive. See for example James Dobbins, "Who Lost Iraq? Lessons from a Debacle," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (September/October 2007): 61-74; and Stephen Biddle, "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon," *Foreign Affairs* 85 (March/April 2006): 2-14.

[2] More revealing than the self-criticisms mounted by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are the interviews in Kristina Borjesson, ed., *Feet to the Fire: The Media after 9/11 – Top Journalists Speak Out* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005).

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might become a more potent voice for reasoned, informed, civil debate on the major issues of the day.[3]

While a synthetic work like *Ascendancy* has a public function, it also has a distinctly personal dimension. It captures a moment in the author's evolving thinking. Thomas Zeiler's comments on empire and hegemony zero in on a major conceptual problem with which I have been wrestling. I conceived *Ascendancy* in the late 1990s, influenced by a decade or two of immersion in global history. I had taught a large undergraduate survey on the post-1945 world, helped initiate a global history program in my department, and prepared a text on the post-1945 world.[4] These activities left me more and more intrigued by the impressively multi-layered and arguably unprecedented nature of U.S. dominance at century's end. How had this situation developed? Midway through my search for an answer, I was ambushed by 9/11. The resulting national upheaval intensified my interest in what I was coming to call hegemony and in how it could be created but also abused and lost.

In developing my argument for the importance of hegemony, I have left myself open to misunderstanding. But I recognized this only after putting the manuscript for *Ascendancy* into production in Spring 2006. I had wanted to suggest that hegemony might be a useful way of thinking about dominance that was analytically distinct from empire. But my intent (not clearly communicated in the book) was not to suggest that hegemony was a better term than empire or to deny empire. Indeed, looking back I see that what I was really doing in *Ascendancy*'s treatment of settler colonialism as well as formal and informal control in the third world was to affirm the importance of an American empire in several guises extending over virtually the entire national history. My belated realization that I had not been explicit on the relation of empire to hegemony prompted a short essay posted earlier this year to History News Network.[5] How the fairly recent U.S. hegemony relates to the far older pattern of empire and how both fit within an evolving conception of American nationalism is an issue that I'm keen to explore further.

Finally, a synthetic work faces the challenge that lies at the heart of the historical discipline—creating a story that is coherent and fresh but also convincingly ground in the evidence. The richness of the diplomatic history field and the license its expansive concerns give to roaming into adjoining fields intensify the challenge for any broadly conceived project. I felt these difficulties most acutely in working out periodization. In tracing the U.S. advance, through its major stages, I finally settled on two distinct pivots and I hinted at a third in the offing. The commentators raise good questions about all three.

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[3] My own thinking on this point is developed in a recent address on "International studies to what end?" delivered at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (available at http://www.unc.edu/news/archives/oct07/Huntspeech101207.html).

[4] *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004) along with *The World Transformed, 1945 to the Present: A Documentary Reader* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004).

[5] "Empire, Hegemony, and the U.S. Policy Mess," posted to HNN, 21 May 2007 (available at http://www.hnn.us/articles/37486.html).

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The first of these pivots involves what Stephen Rabe correctly calls the conventional "rise to great power" between 1898 and 1919. But as I set what I thought was a familiar period in context of global forces, I found myself facing questions that even now remain a bit of a puzzle. Let me note two of the most tangled.

- What were the sources of the astonishing accretion of U.S. economic might over the course of the nineteenth century? The U.S. performance was unlike anything previously seen in human history and surpassed the performance of other, suddenly energized North Atlantic economies. My quest for understanding took me into controversies over slavery as a source of wealth, the importance of foreign capital relative to domestically generated investment, the impact of industrial protectionism, and the creation and application of new technology (to name only the most obvious). The perplexity raised by these issues was then compounded when I turned to the heart of the matter—the relation of the economy to an invigorated turn-of-the-century policy. Did the former figure as a material precondition for the latter, as an inspiration, as a source of real or imagined vulnerability, or as some mix of the three?

- Why the rapid rise between McKinley and Wilson of the American state with a powerful executive at the center? My first impulse, derived from global history, was to think about the U.S. case in comparative terms. The obvious first step was to measure claims on national income made by central governments at the turn of the century. This yardstick for measuring the growth of state capacity proved (as Alfred Eckes notes) a mare's nest of data that does not always distinguish between revenue going to Washington and state/local governments, that estimates that revenue in different ways, and that struggles to make data from one country comparable to that of other countries at any one moment not to mention over extended periods of time. Beyond the basic data question lurked a variety of other fascinating but no less intractable issues, not least the impulse prompting state leaders to make growing claims on national resources, the importance of new technologies to the increasing effectiveness of state-led national mobilization, the role of a burgeoning state in resolving tensions within notions of national identity, and the changing understanding of the state in relation to formal empire, the rules of warfare, the control of immigration and trade, and other matters made salient by the multiplication of global connections by the late nineteenth century.[6]

The second pivot point—as surprising to Rabe as it was to me—was the 1940s. In *The World Transformed* published in 2004 I had made an elaborate case for the end of World War II marking the onset of a new age. Three years later driven by the themes that were emerging as central to *Ascendancy*—the drive toward political and military dominance, the bid for hegemony, and troubled relations with the colonial world—I found myself seeing

[6] The literature that I found helpful on the emergence of the American state is discussed in *The American Ascendancy*, 365-66, above all the essay by that master of comparative history, Raymond Grew: "The Nineteenth-Century European State," in *Statemaking and Social Movements*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 83-120.

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the entire 1940s as a piece. The long mobilization occasioned first by global war and then the early Cold War produced a further expansion of state capacities and a profound rethinking of the American role in the world. Out of these developments emerged the U.S. global hegemony that has characterized the last half century. Readers will be right to ask whether the 1940s really witnessed the emergence of a clear, coherent, consistent notion of hegemony? How does a supposedly enlightened U.S. hegemony square with the less savory pattern of intervention and control that extended after 1945 from countries in Latin America and eastern Asia to countries all around the world? Empire under new names like nation-building, containment, and humanitarian policing was still empire and arguably at odds with the high-minded claims associated with the new American-defined international order.

The third pivot point in my story is the one that may emerge out of strains developing in recent U.S. policy. Having asked about how we got from there (circa 1900) to here (circa 2000), I had to offer a reading of the last several decades whatever the difficulties of detachment and the limits of the sources. My conclusion was that the end of the Cold War was less important than a variety of unsettling trends with origins in the 1940s and 1950s that had by the late 1960s produced debilitating strains in U.S. policy and that are still making mischief today.

Perhaps the most consequential of those trends was a narrowing of the understanding of hegemony to neo-liberal terms. Ideas about free markets and free elections came to exercise a subtle, pervasive grip on thinking about foreign relations. The result was a distinct narrowing of the 1940s vision of hegemony. The Bretton Woods accords are a key element in this argument. Zeiler and Eckes advance the conventional view that Nixon overturned the system established at Bretton Woods by breaking the dollar-gold link. My admittedly minority reading is that Nixon merely made an adjustment that left the institutions and core values represented by Bretton Woods largely in place. The dollar remained the dominant currency; the Bretton Woods institutions survived; and the free market impetus gathered strength (with capital allowed free movement of the sort that John Maynard Keynes had blocked in 1944 in the name of currency stability and state sovereignty). Bretton Woods thus figures not as a transient arrangement but as the herald of neo-liberal dominance over U.S. policy and in turn the global economic system.

How the current tensions at work within U.S. policy resolve themselves is the question of the hour. Those pessimistically inclined may well be right to anticipate not a major shift but more of the same—a degeneration of republican values and deformation of the constitutional order, a sour America frustrated with its own recent performance and future prospects and at odds with the world. On the other hand, global forces may well be driving us willy-nilly toward new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relation to the world. Environmental degradation, the persistence of regional diversity, stubborn nationalist resistance to imperial pretensions, and rising skepticism about a neo-liberal global order that makes comparative advantage, corporate privilege, and constantly rising GDP articles

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of faith—these are but some of the pressures that could push U.S. policy to pivot in the near term and perhaps even in directions that give heart to the optimists.

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